

Five myths about America's schools

By [Paul Farhi](#), Published: May 20 Washington Post

The end of the school year and the layoffs of [tens of thousands of teachers](#) are bringing more attention to reformers' calls to remake public schools. Today's school reform movement conflates the motivations and agendas of politicians seeking reelection, religious figures looking to spread the faith and bureaucrats trying to save a dime. Despite an often earnest desire to help our nation's children, reformers have spread some fundamental misunderstandings about public education.

1. Our schools are failing.

It's true that schools with large numbers of low-income and English-as-a-second-language students don't perform as well as those with lots of middle- and upper-middle-class students who speak only English. But the demonization of some schools as "[dropout factories](#)" masks an important achievement: The percentage of Americans earning a high school diploma has been rising for 30 years. According to the Department of Education, the percentage of 16-to-24-year-olds who were not enrolled in school and hadn't earned a diploma or its equivalent fell to 8 percent in 2008.

Average SAT and ACT scores are also up, even with many more — and more diverse — test-takers. On international exams such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, U.S. elementary and middle school students have improved since 1995 and rank near the top among developed countries. Americans do lag behind students in Asian nations such as Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan on these tests, but so do Europeans. The gap in math and science scores may be an East-West divide.

2. Unions defend bad teachers.

Unions have proved amenable to removing the bad apples in their ranks — with due process. Montgomery County, for instance, implemented its Peer Assistance and Review program with union cooperation a decade ago. It requires every new teacher and those flagged as "underperforming" by a principal to be observed by a specialist over a school year. All teachers get support, advice and a chance to do better; then they are reevaluated. Those who fall short lose their jobs. Between 2006 and 2010, 245 teachers resigned or were dismissed. Many districts have similar programs, but, as [a Harvard study](#) pointed out, they are expensive.

Reformers who attack unions for school problems should mind their logic: Some school systems show better results than others, yet most have teachers' unions. If unions are universally problematic, why are some students succeeding while others languish?

3. Billionaires know best.

Bill Gates, real estate developer Eli Broad and Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg have made massive financial contributions to public schools to promote pay-for-performance programs, which reward teachers with bonuses when their students do better on standardized tests. They argue that merit pay creates the same incentives for public-sector employees that bonuses do in the private sector.

But the emerging research on merit pay for teachers disputes that.

In a three-year, \$10 million study released last fall, Vanderbilt University researchers found no significant difference in performance between students who were taught by middle school teachers eligible for cash bonuses and those who weren't. That's no surprise to most teachers; they know that teamwork is key to success. Individual pay-for-performance schemes create the opposite incentive, fostering competition, not collaboration.

Despite this, Gates alone is investing \$290 million over seven years in schools in Memphis, Tampa, Pittsburgh and Los Angeles. Zuckerberg has endorsed New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie's merit-pay agenda by [pledging \\$100 million](#) over the next five years to Newark's schools, whose budget this year is \$940 million.

There's no doubt that these schools can use every dime that rich guys give. But attaching strings for pet projects is elitist and wasteful.

4. Charter schools are the answer.

President Obama certainly thinks so. He's said that state limits on the number of charter schools aren't "good for our children, our economy or our country." He and Education Secretary Arne Duncan want more charters — taxpayer-supported schools that operate independently of traditional public school systems. About 1.5 million children, or 3 percent of public school students, attended a charter school this past school year. Some have outperformed their non-charter peers, particularly in inner cities.

Credit for that may rest solely with the students, however. Charter school students are among the most motivated, as are their parents, who sought an alternative education for their children and mastered the intricacies of admission.

And siphoning off those better students through choice may create the same disastrous effect as de facto segregation through the geography of poverty — it leaves behind those least able to advocate for themselves and most susceptible to falling through the cracks.

All for results that are not uniformly impressive: [A 2010 study](#) of 2,330 middle school students at charter schools in 15 states found that they performed no better in math and science. And a Stanford University study in 2009 concluded: "Nearly half of the charter schools nationwide have results that are no different from the local public school options and over a third, 37 percent, deliver learning results that are significantly worse than their student[s] would have realized had they remained in traditional public schools."

5. More effective teachers are the answer.

Former D.C. Schools chief Michelle Rhee and other big-city superintendents called for more effective teachers in a [reform “manifesto”](#) published in The Washington Post last fall. Well, sure. Who doesn’t want more effective teachers? While we’re at it, let’s get more effective superintendents, curriculum specialists and principals, too.

Let’s be realistic: Teachers aren’t miracle workers. There’s only so much they can do to address problems that troubled students bring to class every day, including neglect, abuse, and unaddressed medical and mental health issues. The obvious and subtle ways that poverty inhibits a child’s ability to learn — from hearing, visual and dental problems to higher asthma rates to diminished verbal interaction in the home — have been well-documented.

So let’s seek to improve the state of families. Attacking schools and teachers makes everyone feel like a reformer, but the problems begin long before a child steps through the schoolhouse door.

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